
WHAT IS “MOBILITY”?

For anyone who has a significant visual impairment “mobility” means being able to travel as safely and independently as possible. For pupils in school this could be in and around school or from home to school.

To achieve independent movement and travel two specific abilities need to be developed:-

- 1) **orientation** - an awareness of space and an understanding of the situation of the body within it.
- 2) **mobility** – the ability to move oneself without coming to any harm.

These are abilities which those of us who have good vision take for granted. However, children and young people who have a severe visual impairment may need specific intervention and a carefully planned training programme if they are to reach their potential in independent living.

This booklet aims to explain what mobility training is, what it involves and why it is so important for children and young people who are severely visually impaired.

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WHY ARE MOBILITY AND ORIENTATION SO IMPORTANT?

- ◆ The ability to move in and around the environment affects people psychologically, socially, emotionally, economically and physically.

- ◆ There is a direct connection between movement and learning. It is through moving within our environment that understanding of the world is developed. Children who are able to move independently are exposed to a far wider range of real experiences which help to develop language, literacy and understanding of concepts.

- ◆ Independent movement increases our range of social opportunities – meeting new people, visiting friends, going to shops, youth clubs etc.

- ◆ Free, relaxed and speedy movement can be difficult for a child with a severe visual impairment. Yet it is exactly this type of movement which develops posture, improves muscle tone in the legs and feet and improves the walking gait.

- ◆ Being able to travel independently is an essential requirement for employment. Taxis can be a very expensive alternative to buses and trains.

- ◆ Children who are born with severe visual impairment can have problems in forming correct concepts of their own bodies. Their mental map of the world and their own position in it may be very limited. Concepts, such as distance, will be difficult to understand. For these children education in mobility should start in the early years and continue throughout the child's school life and beyond.

MEETING MOBILITY NEEDS IN SCHOOL

1. How will I know if a child needs formal mobility training?

All children who have a visual impairment are assigned a Qualified Teacher of the Visually Impaired (QTVI) by the Head of Service. She/he works with the child, the teacher and TAs and, where appropriate, the parents/carers. The QTVI will have already identified ways to develop movement and concepts related to getting about safely from a very early age.

There may come a time, however, when it is agreed that the child needs specific training to develop mobility skills. The QTVI will then refer the child to the Service's qualified Mobility Specialist.

2. What is a Mobility Specialist?

The Visual Impairment Service employs a qualified Mobility Specialist whose role is to:-

- ◆ assess a child's mobility needs in school and provide a written report
- ◆ devise and implement appropriate training programmes
- ◆ teach mobility, orientation and cane skills as appropriate
- ◆ provide training for school staff so they can support the child's training programme on a daily basis
- ◆ liaise with parents where appropriate
- ◆ in collaboration with the QTVI - help school staff to identify minor building or environmental adaptations which will improve access to the physical environment of the school, ensure safety and promote independence e.g. highlighting edges of steps, improving lighting on dark stairwells.

3. How is the training programme organised?

When a child or young person has been identified as needing assessment or training the Mobility Specialist will:-

- ◆ visit the pupil in school. The first visit will be made jointly with the QTVI. The Mobility Specialist will also offer to meet with parents to explain her involvement to them.

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- ◆ assess the child's skills and identify training needs. An assessment record will be completed and used to plan the training programme. In some cases, assessment will indicate that the child already has the necessary skills and there will be no further involvement by the Mobility Specialist at this stage.

When the Mobility Specialist identifies a training need she will: -

- ◆ produce a written programme outlining: -
 - the nature of the training required e.g. a specific route
 - the expected duration of the training
 - the frequency and length of her visits

A copy of this programme will be given to school, the QTVI and parents, as appropriate.

- ◆ visit school/home as specified in the programme. Where the child has TA hours allocated to him/her it is expected that the TA will join in the mobility training sessions in school. S/he will be given advice on how to reinforce skills between the Mobility Specialist's planned visits. It is expected that the school will ensure that the TA has regular opportunities to practise mobility skills with the pupil.
- ◆ complete a visit record sheet at the end of every school visit. This will contain brief details of work undertaken, follow-up action recommended and the date of the Mobility Specialist's next visit. A copy will be left in school.

CASE STUDY 1 - JOHN'S NEW SECONDARY SCHOOL

John is in his last year at his local primary school. In an eye test he can only read the top letter of the familiar eye chart. He has very poor distance vision and his eyes are particularly sensitive to bright light.

Why mobility training?

All John's friends are looking forward to starting their new school. It is a large comprehensive consisting of several two storey buildings. John's primary school is small and all on ground level; he knows his way around very well.

John is worried that he will have problems moving around a large and unfamiliar school campus. His parents are concerned because they know he is anxious and they wonder if he will be able to manage. His new teachers have never taught a visually impaired student before; they are not sure that John will cope and be safe in their school.

The Mobility Programme

◆ Autumn Term – Year 6

The Mobility Specialist visits John's new school to assess the environment for hazards such as open drain holes, badly cracked or uneven paving stones and stairs, steps and bollards that need to be highlighted with white or yellow paint, areas where there is too much glare or too little light.

◆ Summer Term

John makes three visits to his new secondary school with the Mobility Instructor to:-

- familiarise him with the general school layout and the main areas which all pupils need to know e.g. hall, cafeteria, gym, library
- familiarise him with those areas of the school used regularly by Y7 pupils and plan routes with him
- make a personal map with the above information

John lives quite close to the secondary school. He would like to walk to school with his friends but his parents need to be sure that, if he becomes separated from them, he can make his own way independently and safely. The Mobility Specialist teaches him a safe route which includes some road crossings, use of an underpass and negotiating a busy shopping area. He is alerted to possible hazards e.g. advertisement boards, parked bicycles and lamp posts.

The Results

- ◆ John's parents were reassured that he could get to, and move around his new school with ease.
- ◆ Staff at his new school saw him moving through busy corridors, and going up and down stairs independently; their fears for his general safety were allayed.
- ◆ The school buildings were made a safer place for all pupils.
- ◆ John was familiar with his new school, he had met some of his new teachers and now he was really looking forward to September.



MOBILITY AND ORIENTATION FOR WHEELCHAIR USERS

Sometimes, when we are a passenger in a car, we can arrive at our destination without really knowing the route we took to get there. Being moved around in a wheelchair can be a similar experience for visually impaired people. They will need to be taught about their environment and about individual routes in ways that makes sense to them.

- ◆ Visually impaired children who use wheelchairs can become disorientated if they have little awareness of where they are or where they are going.
- ◆ They may be anxious about being “hurled through space”.
- ◆ Visually impaired children who use wheelchairs may feel powerless and could become totally dependent on other people.
- ◆ They may feel isolated because of restricted contact with their immediate environment.

GUIDELINES FOR SUPPORTING A VISUALLY IMPAIRED TRAVELLER IN A WHEELCHAIR

- ◆ Tell the traveller who you are, where you are going and why.
- ◆ Make turns at right-angles (90 degrees – ¼ turn).
- ◆ Identify permanent landmarks on route that are at an appropriate height. Stop the wheelchair and allow time for the child to feel and explore suitable landmarks. Also include sound and smell clues where appropriate.
- ◆ Explain bumps and different floor surfaces, which may provide key information to wheelchair users about their location.
- ◆ Use the same routes so the sequence of movement can be remembered.
- ◆ Avoid distractions and concentrate on the individual child.
- ◆ Speak only as much as is helpful giving short, clear and relevant information.
- ◆ Never abandon a child in a wheelchair in the middle of a corridor. Place them where they can feel a wall or table and explain where they are and what you are going to do.

CASE STUDY 2 – INCREASING FATIMA’S INDEPENDENCE

Fatima is a 15 year old with very poor distance vision. She is in the senior department of a special school. She has cerebral palsy and spends most of the day in a wheelchair.

Why mobility training?

Fatima is moved around her school environment in a manual wheelchair. Many of her peer group move around school independently and she wishes to become more independent like them. Fatima would like to have an electric wheelchair which will give her a lot more independence.

The Mobility Programme

The Mobility Specialist visits the school to:

- ◆ assess Fatima’s current skills
- ◆ plan an individualised mobility programme in collaboration with the pupil and staff
- ◆ work with Fatima fortnightly to help her identify and locate landmarks and clues around school and sequence simple routes within school
- ◆ train school staff so they can reinforce the mobility programme on a daily basis

The Results

As Fatima moves around school each day:-

- ◆ she is increasingly able to recognise landmarks and clues and this has enabled her to become better orientated within school
- ◆ she is now much less passive and is able to take an active part when moving around school e.g. she can indicate to staff which way they should go to reach destinations around the school
- ◆ she has become much more confident
- ◆ her communication and social skills have improved

The mobility programme has helped Fatima to move closer towards being able to use an electric wheelchair, which will give her the freedom and independence she wishes to have.